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AUTHOR Mende, Richard
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ABSTRACT

In June 1995, Cambrian College, in Ontario, Canada, began to train faculty for a new Internet-based Teachers of Adults Certificate program, utilizing electronic mailing lists as virtual classrooms and enrolling its first students in October of that year. Faculty were recruited for their experience in delivering courses through more conventional distance methods, such as teleconferencing and independent study. In the first step of the training, faculty were provided with hard copies of materials discussing the configuration of the PINE electronic mail software system, essential commands and functions, and characteristics of mailing lists and listservs. In addition to these training documents, 13 online training files were distributed to the participants and an electronic mailing list was established. The online files allowed the faculty to enjoy themselves while learning some of the significant conventions of the online community. Towards the end of the program, participants were given a test which asked them to obtain an updated list of the subscribers to the course mailing list, determine the participation of subscribers, and e-mail individuals who had not participated in the past 24 hours. Of the 15 faculty members who committed to the training program, 8 completed it, allowing the new certificate to be implemented on schedule. (TGI)

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Training Faculty for Internet Delivery

A Paper Presented at the Instructional Technology Conference 96

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Richard Mende, MA, MEd

Professor, Distance Education

Cambrian College

Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

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Cambrian College began to offer its Teachers of Adults Certificate Program using Internet technology in October of 1995. Cambrian College was the first community college in Canada to offer a full program online. Training faculty for online delivery was a vital part of preparation for online delivery. This case study briefly reports how the College used its limited resources to create a cadre of faculty who had both the technical skills for online delivery and the knowledge of the Netiquette basics essential for online delivery.

While this paper focuses on the actual training session itself, there are at least two important decisions that preceded the training: choice of a delivery technology, and faculty recruitment. We will deal with these two issues only concisely, but they cannot be ignored, since they impacted in a significant way on the content and form of the training itself.

At the time of the start of the training period, Cambrian College's Internet capability was very limited. We had access only to e-mail, ftp, gopher and telnet software. Our e-mail access was the Unix PINE mailer, a very capable mailer, but a mailer not compatible with a Windows environment. We had no computer-conferencing capability at all. We were not even operating our own listserv mail distribution software. However, Humber College in Toronto was operating a listserv, and they were generously supporting mailing lists for all colleges in the Province of Ontario.

Our choice of a delivery technology was obvious. We would use mailing lists for our virtual classrooms. And, in order to familiarize the faculty with mailing lists, we would train the faculty using a mailing list.

Faculty were recruited, not for their computer skills or their Internet expertise, but for their experience in delivering the Teachers of Adults Program via more conventional distance

methods, teleconferencing and independent study. The computing skills of the faculty were diverse, to say the least. Some had done nothing but word processing. One was an advanced user, with respect to multimedia software. A few had very limited experience with existing Internet technology. There was no one who had never touched a computer, at all.

Here, near the start of this paper, is an overview of our success. We make no attempt to disguise the fact that the program was not universally successful. At the same time, at the end of the program we had enough faculty comfortable with the new delivery system to actually begin program delivery. The program ran from early June, 1995, to late June, 1995. This table summarizes the rate of success:

# of faculty who started (committed to) the program	15
# of faculty who dropped out early	2
# of faculty who got linked too late to participate	2
# of faculty who did not link at all	3
# of faculty who completed the program	8

Here are some more interesting data that reflect the success of the training effort. The program began on June 1, and here are the dates that the faculty first linked to the delivery technology: June 4, 9, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 22, 28. Here are the dates of first public postings to the list: June 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 26. If we ignore those two who did not manage to post at all, the average time lapse between link and first public posting is 8.8 days. The range of the gap between link and first public posting is from 3 to 21 days. It is easy to see that there was a great difference in risk-taking behaviour among the participants. But this comes as no surprise to adult educators, no matter what their delivery technology may be.

Because the majority of faculty were not advanced computer users, we decided, reluctantly, to provide hard copy for the initial stages of the training. This proved to be a wise decision, as it supplied a level of comfort for those who were genuinely threatened by the technology. We distributed four hard copy training files to all participants: Configuring the PINE Mailer, Essential PINE Commands, Using the PINE Addressbook, and Mailing Lists and Listservs.

The PINE mailer, when properly configured, is user-friendly software. But PINE configuration is rather complex, and our online trainees had to complete the configuration before they could use the mailer. The hard copy instructions were as brief and simple as they could be made. Here is a short example from Configuring the PINE Mailer:

> To access the PINE mailer, enter pine at the $ prompt:
> $pine<Enter>
> Now you will be at the PINE main menu.
> Enter s for Set Up and c for Configuration.
> Now you will be in the PINE configuration menu.

Once the participants had completed configuration, we emphasized the simplicity of most PINE commands: c for Compose, r for Reply, f for Forward, m for Main Menu, d for Delete, q for Quit, and so on. The slightly more complex editing commands were left until they were relevant, and until the new users had established a comfort level with the basic commands.

In every aspect of the training, we followed the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid). With respect to mailing lists, we stressed the crucial difference between a list address and a listserv address, and we presented learners only with the most commonly used listserv commands, such as sub and unsub.

In some cases, those with a modicum of Internet experience confused the true newbies.

One trainee had learned the basics of VAX e-mail before our College installed the PINE mailer. In case you are not familiar with VAX e-mail, it is an extremely user-hostile system. The VAX user persisted in using VAX e-mail and asking questions that mystified the PINE beginners. He was eventually cajoled into switching to PINE by such sweetly inspiring words as "Stick with PINE...you're doin' fine!"

Besides the initial hard copy training documents, there were thirteen online training files. This table presents their titles and the dates of their delivery.

The Unofficial Smiley Dictionary	June 18
Acronyms	June 18
Downloading	June 19
Password	June 19
Netiquette	June 20
Summary of Netiquette	June 20
Emphasis in Electronic Text	June 22
Humour and Irony	June 22
Listserv Archives	June 22
Level of Commitment	June 23
CMC (Computer Mediated Communication)	June 23
Friendliness of Cyberspace	June 25
Review	June 28

It will not be difficult for the reader to understand the strategy behind the order of presentation of the training files. For example, the first two files are just plain fun. They allowed the learners to enjoy themselves and relax, while at the same time learning some of the significant

conventions of the online community. Smileys and acronyms enable computer mediated communication. The Internet world would be impoverished without them. It is essential that our online instructors be intimate with the protocols of cyberspace.

My own postings to the group consisted of the training files themselves, public responses to public questions, messages of encouragement, and additional explanations when deemed necessary. I deliberately punctuated my postings with funny or thought-provoking signature files. Besides my name and e-mail address, I surprised them each day with new quotations and aphorisms, such as "Anyone who uses the passive voice is not to be trusted," and "Never learn anything until you find that you have been uncomfortable for a long while by not knowing it."

The humourous approach seemed to be effective. The first public poster used a smiley. The second public poster created her own smiley.

Whenever a particular topic involved a lot of detail, summaries were posted. For example, I reduced Netiquette to a list of Most Important Rules:

1. Conserve resources (delete unwanted mail and files)
2. Make mail messages clear and brief
3. End every mail message with a signature (name and e-mail address)
4. Avoid irony and sarcasm
5. Always edit quoted material
6. Use relevant subject headers
7. Stay on the topic
8. Use good judgement about which messages should be private or public
9. Avoid "flaming" -- one flame always sparks another

10. Avoid using capital letters -- "shouting" is rude

Since humour and irony are such an important part of human communication, ways were demonstrated for participants to use their sense of humour without giving offence.

> A life without humour is a poor life, indeed. So there are certain conventions for using humour and irony on the Internet.
>
> Here is the most common.
>
> Use the ;-) smiley. That's the semicolon smiley, the tongue-in-cheek smiley.
>
> >>I *hate* computers. ;-) <<
>
> When you want to be *absolutely* sure that you won't be misunderstood, then BE absolutely sure.
>
> >>I *hate* computers. [ironic comment] <<

Online delivery involves mastery of new computer skills and new social conventions. It also involves a new kind of commitment. The virtual classroom is, of course, open twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Facilitators never have to be at a certain place at a certain time, but they must have a commitment to learner support. I suggested that people develop their own minimum levels of commitment and make the levels clear to their learners. I strongly recommended that people commit to reading and responding to their e-mail at least twice a week. If they commit to twice a week, they should specify the days, so learners will know when to expect a response. Deviations from the commitment (for family vacations, for example) can be announced in advance to the learners, and alternate arrangements made, when necessary.

The trainees had to do a "test" on June 22. The test consisted of very practical, hands-on review. It also was designed to encourage participation from those who had not been recently active. Here is a copy of the actual "test." Note that TOAFAC-L (Teachers of Adults Faculty

List) was the name of our mailing list.

1. Get an updated list of the subscribers to TOAFAC-L.
2. Compare the list of subscribers with the evidence of online activity.
3. Send private e-mail to one or two people who haven't participated in the last 24 hours.
4. Tell them how much FUN they're missing!

Towards the end of the training session, there was an unexpected disruption over the concept of "flaming." We allowed a certain number of "observers" on the list. The observers were there to learn about online delivery, so they were encouraged to participate. They were not necessarily experienced adult educators. The teaching experience of one of the observers was entirely in the postsecondary classroom, where there are always a certain number of immature individuals. The observer took the stance that rules of behaviour must be established at the beginning of the virtual learning experience.

I was appalled at this intrusion. At the same time, I didn't want to abuse my position as facilitator/moderator to censor discussion. I stated my own views on the issue, and then I invited group participation: "If you feel, as a group, that some kind of code of conduct is necessary, then this is the place to discuss it."

One of the trainees introduced his training concept of "True North." "...I get a group of people to agree on a set of operating principles that help us determine what behaviours are positive." True North was quickly accepted by the other learners, and the issue of a published code of behaviour was dropped, much to my personal relief.

The Review file brought the formal part of the learning experience to an end. However,

TOAFAC-L remains open to this day. It is a place for our online faculty to discuss successes and failures, and to just plain socialize. It is also a place for me to make announcements about enrolment, new technology, or whatever else is of importance to all. The virtual training lab has become a virtual staffroom.

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